

What a Modern Public Library Looks Like Today

How one library reinvented itself to increase patronage and stay relevant to the community.

When Library 21c in Colorado Springs, Colorado, opened up on June 21, 2014, it brought over 112,000 square feet of resources to the community.

To hear Rebecca Cruz and Travis Duncan, the Creative Computer Commons director and media specialist for the library talk about it, it's more than just a new library: they see Library 21c as the “launchpad to challenge everything you know about the public library.

The role of libraries today has evolved, and will continue to do so, and Rebecca and Travis recognized that new technologies were challenging them to rethink the resources they offered. They were seeing that while many patrons still used the library as a place to check out books and spend time in the computer lab, other patrons wanted digital collections, eBooks, and online resources that would help them innovate, communicate, and access new ways of thinking and learning.

112,000

SQ. FT. OF RESOURCES
FOR THE COMMUNITY OF
COLORADO SPRINGS, CO

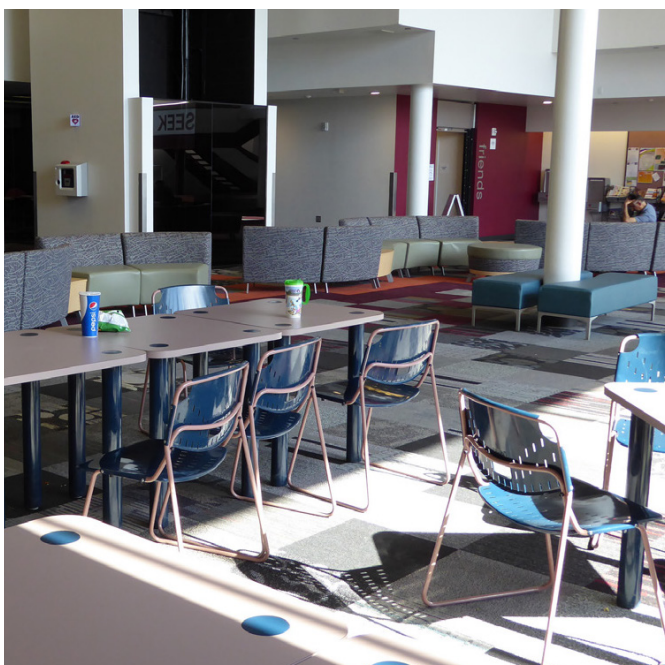


A NEED TO MODERNIZE

In 2012, with an eye toward innovation, Travis went to the American Library Association's conference and saw that there were libraries across the nation that were recognizing the same things he and Rebecca were – a need to modernize and meet the changing demands of their community.

Leading librarians were taking steps to re-establish their libraries as essential spaces in their communities by combining their library's traditional resources with classes and activities ranging from book babies to coding classes, and they were actively using the library to introduce their communities to new technologies.

Once he returned from the conference, Travis and the rest of the team in Colorado Springs knew that they needed to change what they were doing to reach those patrons of today and tomorrow. However, building this library wouldn't be easy: it would require a new philosophy, a new set of resources, and a new building. Travis, Rebecca, and the rest of the team set out on what would be a two-year journey to build a 21st century library — Library 21c.

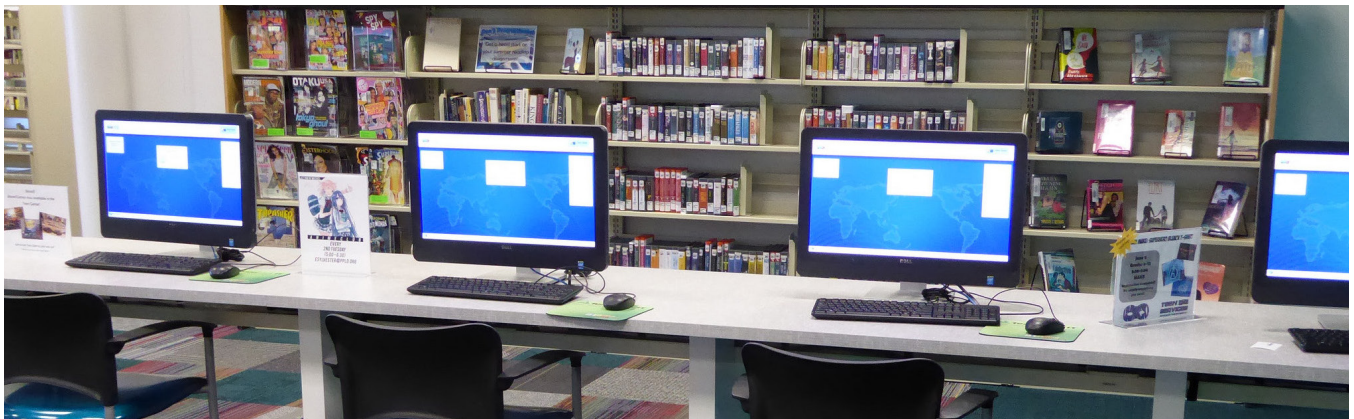


MAKING A MODERN LIBRARY

Throughout the next two years, Travis, Rebecca, and their team worked to determine what they'd need to do in order to modernize their library. They based their work in philosophy, working from Ray Oldenburg's 1989 theory of the 'third place' — a setting, outside of home or work, that acts as an “anchor of community life and foster[s] broader, more creative interaction.” The team realized that they had the opportunity to create one of these places with their new library and creating one of these third spaces was something they couldn't do alone.

In order to amp up their new library into a truly modern space, the team coordinated with their library district to create a survey, gathering responses from libraries across the country. They wanted to know what resources, events, and offerings were drawing in crowds and creating effective third spaces, so they could adopt best practices for Library 21c.

Armed with information about the makeup of today's top libraries, they contracted architects from GE Johnson and Humphries Construction to build a new building that could house new resources and also provide a welcoming environment for families, innovators, and other members of the local community.



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RAY OLDENBURG'S 1989 THEORY OF THE 'THIRD PLACE'

CREATING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ENVIRONMENT

In developing the perfect space, it was especially important for Rebecca that the library meet the needs of Colorado Spring's entrepreneurial and small business community. She spoke to different business owners and startup leaders to see what kinds of resources they needed to expand their businesses.

Those she spoke with talked of a need for technology-equipped spaces where they could finesse their product, meet with partners and investors, and access the tools and intellectual capital they needed to build a thriving business. This would require state-of-the-art conference rooms for business meetings and planning, as well as access to tools and resources they would need to work on different aspects of their business. The upstairs Creative Computer Commons, which Rebecca still runs, works as a collaborative business center where not only entrepreneurs and business owners set up shop, but the next generation of Colorado business people can perfect their craft.

21C'S LIBRARY MISSION STATEMENT

Increase 21st-Century literacy for its community

This focus on entrepreneurship fed naturally into what ended up being the library's mission statement: to increase 21st-century literacy for its community. Through a wide variety of tools, including e-resources, a makerspace that included 3D printers and sewing machines, a theater, and multiple conference rooms, they — Travis, Rebecca, and their team — hoped to provide the community access to technology, creativity, and interaction.

On June 21, 2014, the new Library 21c — named for its 21st century vision — opened, and they got to see if their work had paid off.



A MODERN LIBRARY IN ACTION

When the doors opened, the first reaction wasn't one they expected. "Where are the books?" someone in the crowd asked. The first floor had plenty of desks, cozy reading nooks, and strange new pieces of machinery laid out on a colorful patchwork carpet, but the books were tucked away. Rebecca and Travis assured everyone that the books were still there amongst the new offerings. Those strange machines turned out to be 3D printers and laser engravers ready for patrons to experiment with, and in one wing of the library was a massive children's section full of books and activities. An audio/visual production studio upstairs gave patrons access to everything they needed to write, direct, produce, and edit their own videos. There were even two gaming rooms, one for teens and one for adults, where gamers could try out the latest video games on different consoles.

In October 2014, the library held a 'Mini Maker Faire' — a family-friendly showcase of the library's technology designed to expose kids to new tech innovation — that brought over 6,000 people to the library to design, build, and interact with each other, solidifying the library's place as a creative community space.



FROM “SUPERMARKET” TO STATE-OF-THE-ART KITCHEN

Library 21c shows that a library doesn't just need to be a space for people to check out books — it can be a ‘third space’ straight out of Oldenburg’s philosophy. However, Travis likes to think of it differently:

“Before, we were like a supermarket,” he explains. “People could come and pick up what they needed, then go home to put it all together — but instead of food, we offered knowledge. Today, we’re more like a kitchen. Now, we give you the ingredients and the tools you need to make something right where you are, and immediately share it with the community.”

3,000

**AVERAGE DAILY NUMBER
OF PATRONS WALKING
THROUGH 21C’S DOORS**

Today, an average of 3,000 people walk through 21c’s doors per day. It’s clear to Rebecca that people are responding to this new space like never before. She says that her favorite thing about working in the library is simply seeing people’s reactions to the new resources and spaces the library offers. Whether they’re checking out books, creating new business solutions, exploring technologies, or simply working quietly, Rebecca says she’s heard nothing but positive things from the community. She recalls one patron’s words that best sum up how she feels about their new, modern community library: “As a taxpayer,” the woman said, “I’m jumping for joy!”



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